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Church of Becket

THE FOUNDING
OF THE
FIRST CHURCH OF BECKET



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The Founding of the First Church of Becket

"An Historical Discourse"
on Events to 1806 A. D.

"And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord,

And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us; it shall be therefore a witness unto you lest ye deny your God."

Joshua 24:26, 27.

We are celebrating an anniversary based upon the foundation of this church in the year 1758. But the first stone of this structure, figuratively speaking, was set up within a few days of twenty-three years previously, that is, at the very opening of 1736. We have in mind the "covenant", or provision for religion, customarily made in connection with the opening of new territory for settlement. Like the "first churches" in all the older towns of western Massachusetts, this *First Church of Becket* had its real origin in a provision of the original grant to the proprietors of the town. Becket was the fourth of the Housatonic townships, along with Tyringham, New Marlborough and Sandisfield, opened by the Great and General Court of the Province of Massachusetts Bay on the then new road "betwixt Westfield and Sheffield", each "of the contents of six miles square", with sixty-three home lots laid out in each township, one for the first settled minister, one for the second minister, one for the school and one each for the proprietors. In such manner, the obligation was placed upon the proprietors to provide in the very beginning for the establishment of "Gospel preaching" in the new towns. Similar terms in the earlier grant of lands adjoining in the Housatonic valley had set a precedent which was zealously followed, and the minister and the meeting house were primary considerations.

There were already two churches within the territory now embraced in Berkshire County, when the original grant for the four Housatonic townships was given in January, 1736. In June, 1735, Jonathan Hubbard of the Yale College class of 1724, had been called to settle as minister in Sheffield whose church was organized in the autumn following. The

Stockbridge Church virtually began with the settlement of John Sergeant, also from Yale, as missionary amongst the Stockbridge Indians. He was ordained and took up his work permanently shortly before the organization of the Sheffield church, that is, late in 1735. The church in Great Barrington was set apart seven years later, with Samuel Hopkins settled as its minister. New Marlborough organized its church, the first in the Housatonic townships, on the last day of October in 1744, with Thomas Strong ordained as minister. A meeting house had already been built in Tyringham (No. 1 of the Housatonic towns) but, because of continuous disturbances during King George's, or the "first French" War, the organization of the church was delayed until 1750. Adonijah Bidwell, a classmate at Yale of Thomas Strong and the chaplain at Fort Massachusetts and at Louisburg under Sir William Pepperel, was settled as its first minister. Six years later the church in Sandisfield was added to the number which antedate the Becket church.

Becket was cut off from these neighbors on her further western borders because for two decades there were no means of communication between her and them. "When the county was first settled, and for many years afterwards, the only road from the east over the Green Mountain range, was from Blandford, in the county of Hampden, through the south east part of Otis, the north part of Sandisfield and through Tyringham to Great Barrington. This was called the great road from Boston to Albany." It was 1770 when a road was first opened to the westward of "Nathaniel Kingsley's lot on the Burnt mountain or Brier Hill, so called" (i. e. Jacob's Ladder), connecting with the Stockbridge County road, the present Route 20. Therefore, in the early days, Becket was thrown wholly into association with the Scotch Presbyterian settlement in Blandford, which was then backward in matters of the church and town — evidence of which lies in the fact that the meeting house begun by their proprietors in 1740 was not finished until sixty-five years afterwards. Blandford was the only port of entry into Becket. The Proprietors of Township No. 4, that is, Becket, reported in October, 1738, that they "had found a road [probably an Indian trail] from Glasco [Blandford] to said Township and cleared the same up so as to make it passable." For a good many years this was the only road into Becket. It was used by the proprietors in laying out the town and all the first settlers went up that way. Some of it is still in use, that part just south of Bonnyrigg Corners, but the section known as "the soldiers' road" is altogether impassable, except on foot.

Even before the proprietors of Becket set about clearing the roads they recorded a vote to provide for a "Meeting House." On February 27th, 1739, they took this action, "Voted that the Meeting House shall be set on land left for a way against Lot No. 22." Their first road into the township was laid out to pass by the site thus chosen. Settlers were slow in coming in to fulfill their plans but a few families must have been in the town by 1753, for the first birth recorded was that of a son of Nathaniel Kingsley, born November 15th, 1753. Jonathan Walker was

evidently permanently settled on the Walker mill grant by that time. Within five years thereafter two other Kingsley brothers from old Windham in Connecticut, the Wadsworths from Norwich, the Messengers and Elijah Alford from Simsbury, and several other families from Connecticut were added to the settlement. In the early autumn of 1758, the proprietors of Becket invited Ebenezer Martin of the Yale College class of 1756 to settle as the first minister in the plantation then merely known as Township No. 4. He came from the Canada Parish in Windham, Connecticut, and, it is safe to say, the Kingsleys' influence must have had something to do with the choice. Mr. Martin arrived in his field in October and immediately began the work of "gathering" the church.

Martin's early entries in excellently preserved script fill many pages in the original records of the church. From them a fairly detailed account of its organization may be reconstructed. Until the meeting house was built four years afterwards the house of "the Widow Lida King", on the property now occupied by Camp Greylock, was used for all religious gatherings. There, on the 27th of December, a fast was held "preparatory to the ordination of Mr. Martin; and the Rev. Mr. Morton of Blandford and the Rev. Mr. Smith of Granville did attend the fast and the Rev. Mr. Smith did preach the sermon and on the 28th day these two reverend gentlemen gathered a church of Christ by prayer and supplication to God." On the 22nd of February, 1759, Mr. Martin's ordination was performed with a council of ministers and delegates from Westfield, Blandford and Granville. The Covenant was signed by five persons including the pastor, namely Ebenezer Martin, Thomas Baird, junior, Philip Goss, Isaiah Kingsley and William Watson. In December of the same year, thirteen Articles of Faith in stern Calvinistic form and temper were drawn up and signed by seven persons, four of whom had signed the Covenant. William Watson's name is missing and the names of David Lee, Daniel Waitt and Jonathan Walker are added.

Many theological questions of these times came up in Becket for discussion. At the first church meeting in March, 1759, a vote was recorded on the baptism of children and concerning the question of eligibility for church membership (the question of the Half Way Covenant, probably). At the same meeting the first deacon was chosen, Isaiah Kingsley who served the church in that capacity for thirty-seven years. A few days after his election his son, Enos, was baptised. This was the first recorded baptism. The second deacon, Ebenezer Bush, was chosen in 1761. He served a short time only for he died of smallpox when a family by the name of Ewing brought the dread disease into his house. There is a negative vote recorded in the *Town Book of Becket* which indicates a question as to whether the town should allow his family some reparation "for the Trouble of Ewing's family having the smallpox in his House." Isaiah Kingsley's brother, Nathaniel, was the third to be designated to the office of deacon. Upon Isaiah's death, Ebenezer Walden and Dr. Oliver Brewster were elevated to this influential post and on October 8th, 1807, Elijah Alford, 2nd, and Enos Kingsley were made deacons.

The meeting house was erected in 1762 on the lot set aside for that purpose more than twenty years before. It stood east of the present structure on the opposite side of the ancient "common." Jonathan Wadsworth, Nathaniel Kingsley, Henry Walker, James Birchard, Jr. and Jonathan Eastman were the building committee. The meeting house, a building forty-five feet long and thirty-five feet wide, was doubtless very crudely built and only partially finished. No account of any dedication is available. In fact we do not know whether there was a formal dedication. In 1770, the town voted to "putty in the glass and get irons to fasten the Meeting House doors" and again, in 1772, "to give Liberty to the Subscribers for Building a Steeple, to Build the same and finish the Meeting House if they think fit. Also, if Subscribers should fall short for Building said Steeple and finishing said House the Town will be at the charge of finishing the same properly within one year from next Fall providing it should be a fruitful Season the summer coming and if not to be Delayed one year longer." The town fathers were cautious, but were conscientious and habitually faithful in the discharge of their churchly duties.

Amongst Ebenezer Martin's later records is "A true account of the names of the heads of all the families of the township No. 4". Forty-eight names are in the list, showing by their very number that the settlement had been steadily increasing. At last in 1765 there were the necessary fifty families and the town was incorporated under the name of Becket. In explanation of this name it has been said that it was given by the Royal Governor of the Province, Sir Thomas Bernard, and may have been suggested by his cousin, Lord Barrington, whose chief estate was Becket in Berkshire County, England. Ebenezer Martin, as it happened, had been dismissed from the church when the town was incorporated. His last years were troublous, partly because of some indiscretions of his own, and in some measure because of non-resident ownership of town lands which made for difficulty in collecting town taxes to support the church. Nevertheless, Martin must have been in generally good standing, since he was one of the ministerial council present at the organization of the First Church in Pittsfield on February 7th, 1764 (The Rev. Samuel Hopkins of Great Barrington, the Rev. Dr. Stephen West of Stockbridge and the Rev. Ebenezer Martin of Becket made up this council, all of them from Yale).

The town of Becket was without a minister for several years thereafter. At times the vote in town meeting was positively "to provide money for preaching." But at other times it is of record that the vote "passed in the negative." In 1770 the town called as its minister, Mr. Zadock Hunn of Wethersfield, Connecticut, and of the Yale College class of 1766, and voted to allow him "the settlement of Fifty Pounds in addition to Land allowed by the Great and General Court for the second settled minister in the Town of Becket." At his ordination council Adonijah Bidwell of Tyringham was moderator, and Stephen West the scribe (according to a very conspicuous record in the *Town Book*)

One pound, two shillings, sixpence was voted "for fixing up the meeting house before the ordination" and two pounds, nineteen shillings, nine pence to Benoni Messenger for the expenses of the ordination. It is of interest to learn that after Mr. Hunn's ordination Anabaptists (heretics of the time) were to be "discharged" from the payment of taxes, provided they did not neglect their proper share of the ordination expenses. The Town Records leave us in no doubt that its citizens deemed the occasion one of much importance. It was said of Zadock Hunn by one who knew him personally, that he was a man of good ability, sound in judgment, and a good counsellor. He served the Becket church with devoted zeal through the difficult years of the Revolutionary period when many churches were without their ministers. "Plain in manner but fervent in spirit," he was highly acceptable during all the eighteen years of his Becket ministry, and when he left to go to Canandaigua, New York, the church deemed itself "destitute" indeed.

During the chaotic decade following Mr. Hunn's dismissal, interest in the church was at such an exceedingly low ebb and the people of the town so "disunited in their religious sentiments" because of the great number both of Anabaptists and of Methodists who were opposed on principle to taxation for the support of the minister, that, as one record says, "the members of this church and society found it impossible to support the administration of gospel ordinances upon any former establishment." The old system which assumed complete union between town (or state) and church had broken down and the time had come when a new method of carrying on the work of the church was necessary. Members of the old church were distinctly in the minority in town affairs and they were compelled to make some change. In consequence, after much deliberation they reorganized as an ecclesiastical society. By an act of the Legislature of the Commonwealth passed on February 17, 1798, "the First Congregational Society in the town of Becket" was accordingly incorporated. At that time sixty persons "owned" the ancient covenant and initiated plans for the erection of a new house of worship. The town voted thereupon that "the First Congregational Society have Liberty to Build a Meeting House on Land for public use near the meeting house on such place as they shall choose." Col. Bille Messenger, however, made a donation of land for the purpose. The church was "raised" on May 30th, 1800, and dedicated on the 19th of November of that year. The old house was then repaired and used for more than half a century as a "town meeting place." When the third minister, the Rev. Joseph L. Mills, came to the church in 1806, the sixty members of the new "society" had grown to eighty-nine.

The "stone" which our forefathers set up on this hill-top for a witness, still stands in various forms a monument to their diligence in serving the Lord. Its witness lays upon us of the fifth and sixth generations after the obligation to keep and cherish something of our fathers' faith. In our confusing, changing and altogether transformed world there is need of their qualities of firm conviction, steadfast purpose and un-

swerving faithfulness to duty. In honoring the founders of this church, we may with earnestness of heart remind ourselves of the "witness" manifested here, — lest we deny our God.

* * * * *

Not only did the Becket church carry on its mission in its first environment, but its principles and traditional body of beliefs were transmitted through a daughter-church in the "over mountain" country of Ohio. In the era of spiritual and intellectual awakening which began at the turn of the nineteenth century, the new frontier attracted almost undivided attention in western New England. Sixteen of Becket's most respected and influential citizens formed themselves into the Becket Land Company for the purpose of purchasing a township in the Ohio wilderness. The project was successfully carried out and one half the sixteen made plans to dispose immediately of their property in Becket with the intention of removing their families to the new land in the Western Reserve of Ohio. Eleven members of the Becket church asked for their formal dismissal that they might organize themselves into a new and separate church which they proposed to transplant with their settlement into new soil amidst almost alien circumstances.

Recently, in the old homestead in Ohio, where the first band of pioneers gathered, was discovered the original Covenant and Articles of Faith which constituted those eleven persons a separate church. This old document, drawn up by Joseph L. Mills, states precisely that "on the second of May in the year of our Lord 1811, a regular meeting of the First Congregational Church of Becket was holden, at the Meeting House; at which were present the Rev. Messrs. William Gay Ballantine of Washington, Alvan Hyde of Lee and Jonathan Marsh of Middlefield, together with the Pastor of this Church." Also, it certifies, "that at the time and place above mentioned, the persons there named [who presented their written request to be dismissed], (that is) Deacon Elijah Alford, Olive Alford, Ruth Alford, Thatcher Conant, Elizabeth Conant, Susanna Conant, Jeremiah Lyman, Rhoda Lyman, Benjamin Higley, Sally Higley and Anna Streeter, having taken upon themselves the Confession of Faith & Covenant which are here unto annexed, were publicly formed and installed as a regular Church of Christ — By me

JOSEPH L. MILLS,

Minister of the Gospel and

Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Becket.

May 9th, 1811."

Eight other members of the Becket Church were very soon dismissed, who joined the original eleven in founding the Church in Windham, Portage County, Ohio.

September, 1933.

CATHALINE [BREWSTER] ALFORD ARCHER.

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